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4 November 1966

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, Far East Area**SUBJECT : The Communist Buildup in Northern South Vietnam****Summary**

The buildup of North Vietnamese forces in and around the Demilitarized Zone has clearly been the most important strategic military move in Vietnam since the introduction of US combat troops. The buildup has been underway for about six months and has, in effect, extended direct North Vietnamese control across the Demilitarized Zone into Quang Tri Province.

Although it has been pursued at considerable cost to the Communists both in the destruction of manpower and materiel, there is no indication that Hanoi is slackening in its intention to create a major stronghold in the area. Enemy forces now in the DMZ area include the 9,000-man 324th NVA Division and elements of both regiments of the 6,500-man 341st NVA Division. Elements of at least two other North Vietnamese divisions may have moved into southern North Vietnam to bolster back-up forces there.

The creation of a stronghold in Quang Tri Province offers the Communists many military advantages. For example, North Vietnamese troops in this area have considerably shorter supply lines than units operating further south. A handy sanctuary is also available in nearby Laos and in North Vietnam. Moreover, the Communist occupation of northern Quang Tri Province strengthens their military position in countering any US attempt to block infiltration by throwing a cordon of forces across the peninsula. The presence of a sizable Communist force in this area also serves to tie down a significant number of US and South Vietnamese units attempting to meet the threat posed by the buildup.

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It appears, however, that the overriding strategic reason for the intensification of Communist operations in northern South Vietnam and the concomitant destruction of the neutrality of the Demilitarized Zone has been to establish a base from which to continue to fight a protracted war even if developments elsewhere in the South should continue to go against the Communists. The objective of Communist forces in the coming months in northern South Vietnam will be to exact maximum attrition of US and GVN forces under conditions as favorable as possible to the Communists. Any push in the near future by North Vietnamese forces against populated coastal centers would certainly result in their defeat, in the face of US firepower superiority.

The Buildup

1. The first units of the 324th North Vietnamese Army Division began moving into Quang Tri Province in May and June 1968. All three regiments of the division plus a number of support units had apparently arrived in South Vietnam by July. This infiltration-in-strength marked the first time that regular North Vietnamese Army units had moved through the Demilitarized Zone. It was also the first time that such a large Communist force had infiltrated south in such a short period of time. In addition to the 9,000-man 324th Division, at least two unidentified units equivalent in size to regiments are believed to have infiltrated into western Quang Tri Province. Information on these additional units is quite limited, however, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Elements of two other regiments--the 31st and 32nd--of the 6,500 man 341st North Vietnamese Division--have been operating in eastern Quang Tri since September, according to recently captured documents.

2. Backing up this sizable force in North Vietnam and the DMZ is a logistic support force of undetermined size. In addition, elements of two additional NVA divisions may have moved into backup positions in southern North Vietnam.

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4. Thus far there is no evidence that the North Vietnamese forces in the DMZ area are subordinate in any way to the major Viet Cong military chain of command in South Vietnam. The headquarters of Military Region 5 is the top Viet Cong command in the northern half of South Vietnam and, in the past, has exercised control over all Communist forces there.

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however, all indicate that operations in the DMZ area are strictly a North Vietnamese show. Aside from a few provincial Viet Cong units in the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, all of the forces in this area are North Vietnamese Army regulars, possibly in a strength of over 20,000 men.

Military Advantages of the DMZ Buildup

5. Infiltration across the DMZ offered a number of significant military advantages to the Communists. In the first place, it greatly facilitated the movement into South Vietnam of a large enemy force in a short period of time.

for example, stated that his unit's trip--from the northern edge of the DMZ into Quang Tri's mountainous interior--took only 12 days. In contrast, the trip through the Laotian corridor takes about 40 days, often even longer than that. The time factor may have been important in the decision to move in, since Hanoi may have been hoping to take advantage of the political unrest in April and May in the northern provinces.

6. Use of the DMZ route was considerably safer than the longer route through Laos. Communist troops were less exposed to the effects of airstrikes and their commanders could exercise better command and control during the relatively short march. Moreover, the troops were less likely to come down with a debilitating sickness,

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although recently captured documents have indicated that high rates of sickness were a major concern of the Communists after their troops had been quartered in the Quang Tri jungle area for a short time.

7. Still another advantage was the contiguity of North Vietnam and Communist-held portions of Laos to Quang Tri for use as a sanctuary or as a rear supply base. For example, North Vietnamese forces retreated into and north of the DMZ after a series of sharp setbacks during the conduct of US Marine Operation HASTINGS in July. Since that time, however, movement of North Vietnamese elements has continued back south of the DMZ. The use of the DMZ also greatly shortened supply lines and allowed the maximum use to be made of forward supply depots set up in and near the Communist-controlled portions of the DMZ.

8. The movement of North Vietnamese troops into Quang Tri Province also strengthened the Communist military position for countering any US attempt to throw a cordon across through Laos on the ground to block infiltration from North to South Vietnam. Allied ground invasion of North Vietnam has been repeatedly raised in North Vietnamese propaganda and private statements. Hanoi's concern was first noted in connection with press reports that the Allies were planning an infiltration cordon from the South China Sea westward into Laos roughly along the Route 9 axis. As the US buildup in Vietnam continued and gained momentum, there has been considerable speculation in the Western press about proposals for an actual invasion of the DRV. It is thus probable that Hanoi considers there is a necessity for contingent military planning against such an attack, and that the current buildup is at least in part an element of the DRV's anti-invasion measures.

9. At least four divisions may be already deployed in northern South Vietnam and the southern DRV. Supply dumps, and bivouac areas and other military facilities are also under active construction or expansion. In addition, considerable priority is being given to keeping the roads open and in building new roads in the far southern DRV. Anti-aircraft artillery sites are appearing in increasing number and some surface-to-air missile sites have also been introduced.

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10. The effect of the buildup on the North Vietnam--one side of the border has been to establish a defense in depth against any land invasion while also increasing the capacity for supporting Communist forces in the field in South Vietnam.

11. Another advantage to the Quang Tri buildup--already partially realized--is that it ties down a large number of US and other Allied troops in meeting the Communist threat. The US response to the Communist buildup has already taken a considerable force away from other duties in I Corps. Both US Marine division headquarters in South Vietnam have had to reposition from their bases at Da Nang and Chu Lai to meet the growing Communist threat. In addition, a battalion of the 173rd Airborne Brigade has been moved to northern South Vietnam from the Saigon/Bien Hoa area to provide a defense for one of the US bases.

12. The Communist buildup, in effect, has expanded the overall infiltration corridor in an east-west direction and thus should give the Communists greater flexibility in countering the current type of allied interdiction operations. By building up and securing the highlands in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, the Communists have obtained fairly firm control over a corridor which now extends from North Vietnam down into the central mountain area of South Vietnam. Although the movement of men and supplies along such a corridor is still difficult, it will provide an alternate infiltration route to the Laos panhandle.

13. Communist forces may also realize some small advantage from the prevailing weather in this area. The northeast monsoon has already started in the northern provinces of South Vietnam east of the Annamite Cordillera. This should somewhat curtail tactical air operations supporting US operations here as well as the mobility of mechanized US forces. Past rainy season experience, however, suggests that Communist forces will not be as restricted by the rainy season. To the west of the mountains in the Laos panhandle and along the infiltration trails, the roads are already drying out. There have been reports of the resumption of truck traffic in this area nearly a month earlier than in previous years.

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Other Aspects of the Buildup

14. The buildup of North Vietnamese forces in and around the Demilitarized Zone represents a significant switch in Communist strategy for fighting the war in northern South Vietnam. It appears that the overriding strategic reason for the intensification of Communist operations in northern South Vietnam and the concomitant destruction of the neutrality of the Demilitarized Zone has been to establish a base from which to continue to fight a protracted war even if developments elsewhere in the South should continue to go against the Communists. All of the considerable tactical military advantages which the Communists are realizing from their efforts in northern South Vietnam appear secondary to this basic consideration.

15. The strategy of a protracted war began to receive increasing attention in North Vietnamese propaganda during the latter part of 1965 and through 1966. This theme was being pressed at a time when Communist main forces in South Vietnam were losing the military initiative and were being placed on the defensive. The threat of a VC dry season offensive, particularly in the central highlands, was being effectively thwarted by US and GVN spoiling operations. Moreover, Communist main forces were increasingly attempting to avoid large scale battles with superior US forces. Enemy activity, for the most part, was reduced to widespread terrorism, sabotage and harassment.

16. It was about this time that a debate apparently started among top-level North Vietnamese leaders over basic military strategy in South Vietnam. The debate centered on the question of how best to defeat the US in the military sphere. Protagonists included Senior General and politburo member Nguyen Chi Thanh, who has been in South Vietnam directing the war, and, possibly, North Vietnam's long-time and popular Minister of Defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap. These two men, the only senior generals in the North Vietnamese Army, have been rivals for years. It appears that some of the Hanoi leaders, probably including Giap, questioned whether the insurgent forces were capable of maintaining their offensive

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in the face of the rapid US buildup. They suggested a shift to a basically defensive strategy—one that would prolong the war—which would emphasize the raiding and ambush tactics of the guerrillas. Regular forces were to be shielded from casualties and maintained at all costs.

17. The substance of the military debate involved, among other things, the question of the pace and emphasis of the Communist military effort in the south. Thanh argued forcefully in an August 1966 article published in the party journal that the proper strategy was to develop the ability to fight mobile warfare simultaneously throughout the country. He pointed to the period between mid-1964 and mid-1965 as the best example of how this strategy works. During that period the Viet Cong were able, by launching nearly simultaneous attacks both in the highlands and in the flatlands around Saigon, to whip saw the South Vietnamese military reserve to the point that by May 1965 the ARVN was virtually exhausted.

18. The defensive advocates, on the other hand, seem to have opted for the creation of a strong, multi-divisional force, dug in and well supplied in a rather well dispersed region backing up on a larger and safer rear area. Their tactic—based on their experience against the French—is to entice allied forces into forward area of the base region, where entrenched Communist forces are able to inflict severe casualties upon the attacking forces. The tactic will be to rely largely on ambushes from well prepared positions.

19. At the same time their strategy calls for large scale guerrilla warfare behind allied lines in order to tie down as many troops as possible. They hope by these tactics to stretch allied forces thin, holding down the number which can be committed to the assault on their major base areas. They will be willing, moreover, to use large numbers of men and to take heavy casualties as long as enough of the attacking force could be destroyed, thus requiring the allies to withdraw to their own base camp. Communist forces would then try to extend their base area or area of control and begin the same process all over again.

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20. It appears that the initial decision was made prior to the 1965-66 dry season in favor of Thanh's strategy of attempting to stay on the offensive with persistent and large scale attacks on US forces. Communist forces, however, were unable to regain the initiative during the last dry season--a fact which probably led to the renewal of the debate in the spring of 1966. With the recent developments near the DMZ, it now appears that proponents of the return to the defensive strategy are also to be given a chance to prove their point in northern South Vietnam. All of the ingredients for a protracted war are provided here.

Outlook

21. The objective of Communist forces in the coming months in northern South Vietnam will be to exact maximum attrition of US and GVN forces under conditions as favorable as possible to the Communists. This will probably involve continuing hit-and-run guerrilla activity, a tactic that has received increasing attention in Communist publications in recent weeks. In addition, the Communists will probably conduct attacks on isolated or lightly defended outposts such as the Khe Sanh Special Forces camp, and then try to ambush friendly reaction forces. Occasionally, larger battles may be fought if friendly forces can be drawn into the Communist prepared base areas between Route 9 and the DMZ. Communist forces will, of course, attempt to take advantage of any favorable tactical situation that may arise.

22. This is the kind of warfare that the North Vietnamese Army is capable of waging for a long period of time. Moreover, virtually all of the advantages are on the Communist side as long as they follow this strategy.

23. Alleged Communist plans to liberate Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces, as reflected in captured documents and the statements of prisoners, are more likely an exercise in propaganda rather than a valid strategic aim. Any push in the near future by North Vietnamese forces against populated coastal centers would certainly result in their defeat, in the face of US firepower superiority.

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24. Nevertheless, the sizable Communist forces in this area still retain the capability to launch multi-regimental and, perhaps, even multi-divisional attacks against friendly forces. If the Communists are successful in creating and maintaining this base area in northern Quang Tri, they can be expected to pump in additional units in an effort to expand the base.

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